

Long Live the King Sermon Series
#3 – When God Says No
2 Sam. 7:1-14a
Aug. 6, 2006

When we left David last week, he had just taken down the giant Goliath. A lot has happened since then, so let's get up to speed on what's been going on so we can understand the context of today's reading.

After David killed Goliath, King Saul decided to keep David with him in his court. He gave him responsibility in the military, and David became increasingly successful and popular as he conquered neighboring armies. The problem for Saul was that David's popularity was eclipsing his own, so Saul decided to kill David.

There are several great chase scenes that follow as Saul pursues David around the countryside, trying to kill him. The pattern is that Saul chases David, David has a chance to kill Saul but spares him, Saul apologizes to David and promises never to try and kill him again, then in the next chapter, he's throwing a spear at David's head in a jealous rage, and the whole thing starts all over again.

It only took a few spears for David to realize that Saul had it in for him. But David refused to kill Saul, because Saul was still his king. Instead, David chose to live among the Philistines, Israel's arch-enemy, because he knew Saul would never look for him there. Saul ends up dying in battle, and David returns to Israel and becomes the king.

That's where we pick up the story today. Up to this point, David has been in battle almost constantly, slaying thousands of people as he defended Israel from the neighboring nations. Finally, after all this bloodshed, we're told, "the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him." For once, David has a moment of peace and rest.

So David is sitting out on the veranda of his palace, feet kicked up on the railing, sipping a drink with a little umbrella in it. And he looks down and sees the tent which houses the Ark of the Covenant, the container which symbolized God's presence. And David gets this idea. Why should he be living in such luxury while the ark was sitting in a camping tent? He decides to build a house for the ark worthy of being God's residence.

So David asks the prophet Nathan if this is a good idea, and Nathan gives it his blessing. Who wouldn't think it a great idea to honor God - and win the new king some popularity points - by putting up a temple to outdo all other temples? But God speaks to Nathan that night and says something absolutely stunning: God says no.

That may be hard for us to understand at first. What's not to like about David's plan? The Israelites had long been a nomadic people who longed for a place to call home and who desired a centralized location of worship. They were tired of wandering. They wanted to settle down. And David was prepared to help God settle down with them.

But God didn't want to settle down. God had other plans. We have trouble hearing that sometimes. God had other plans. This doesn't mean David's plans weren't worthy. This doesn't mean David's plans were wrong. But God says, "Building me a house is your idea, not mine. This is not what I have chosen for you to do. I have other plans."

Halfway through seminary, I decided that if I was going to make the most of my learning, I needed to immerse myself in a church environment where I could get the most experience as a pastor. So I set my mind on finding a solo student pastorate where I

would be the one in charge, doing all the week-to-week duties of a full-time pastor. I thought, “What better way to serve God and get the most experience during my last two years of seminary?”

So Leigh, Sydney and I drove out to a place called Carpentersville, Indiana, to look at the little church there that needed a pastor. Now, Carpentersville was so small that it took longer to say its name than to drive through it. But I just knew going out there that this was where God was calling me to be. But it became clear after being there just a few minutes that God didn’t agree with me. While I was blinded by my enthusiasm, Leigh was able to see the situation for what it was: a dinky church with a run-down parsonage in a small little town with nothing to do for a young family with a rambunctious toddler. So through the voice of my very wise wife, God said to me, “No. I have other plans.”

Ouch. Has God ever said No to you? You had plans to be a missionary or to go to seminary or to serve God in some grand way. And then you heard, “No, I have other plans.” If you’ve had that experience, you know how hard it is to hear that. We think we know God’s will for us and what God wants us to do, we pursue it with vigor and energy and passion, and then God throws up a stop sign: “No, I have other plans.”

I believe a true test of our faith is how we respond when God says, “No.” We could choose to ignore it, couldn’t we? God’s got it wrong this time, I know what’s best. We can push forward with our plans, willing them to happen, letting our pride and stubbornness overrule our faith and trust. No one likes to be told, “No,” and we’ll sometimes do really stupid things simply because we’ve been told we can’t do them.

But it’s important for us to realize that God’s “no” to us never stops there. “I have other plans,” God says. I believe God’s “no” is always a prelude to better things. God has a reason for every “no,” even if we don’t understand it at the time – and we usually don’t. I think the most difficult time in our Christian walk is the time in between God’s saying no to our plans and God making clear to us why He said no. But we can trust that God’s no is never a rejection; it’s a redirection, steering us back onto God’s path for us.

God’s plan for David was much more far-reaching than a building of bricks and mortar. God tells David that God doesn’t want him to build a house; instead, God is going to do the building, making David a house that will last forever. This house will be David’s offspring, his lineage, from which will come the Messiah, who will establish God’s kingdom forever.

So it turns out God does want a house: not one made of human hands, but of human lives. He didn’t want David’s wealth and riches and architectural grandeur – he wanted his trust, which is so much harder to give. I kicked and screamed all the way home from Carpentersville, just knowing that my plans were better than anything God could have planned for us. And of course, I was wrong. God sent us to a wonderful church in Columbus, Indiana, where I learned more than I could have ever dreamed of learning about being a minister.

We often come to God with our hands full of our dreams and visions, asking God to bless them. But regardless of how noble and worthy those dreams and visions are, they are useless if they are not in tune with God’s plan for us. God cannot pour His riches into hands that are already full. Do we have our hands full of other things right now as we come to God? Is there any room in our arms for God’s plan?

It would have been easy for David to be angered by God’s word to him; after all, God tells David that it will be his son Solomon, not David, who will complete David’s

dream and build the temple. One of the hardest things to hear is that God is going to use someone else to accomplish something you wanted to do.

On our mission trip to New Orleans this year, one of our groups set to work on cleaning out and gutting a house ravaged by floodwaters. Eleven of us spent five days working in this house, cleaning it out, tearing down drywall, hauling out carpet. We were determined to leave this house ready to be rebuilt.

But we didn't make it. When we left on Friday, there was still a few more hours of work left to do. And I was angry about this! A few of us were ready to rent floodlights and work into the night until this project was finished. I let that lack of completion overshadow all the work we had accomplished during the week. I was mad that God was going to use another group to finish what we started, forgetting that what matters most is that it gets finished. Pride can be a nasty thing.

Thankfully, David didn't let his pride get in the way of serving God. When he hears that Solomon will build the temple, David does two things: first, he stops and thanks God for all the blessings he has received. How many of us, when God says "no," stop to remember all the "yeses" God has said to us? I got so caught up in the "no" God said to me about Carpentersville that I forgot to thank God for the "yeses" of a wonderful wife and healthy daughter and a chance to go to seminary in the first place.

The other thing David does is he starts collecting all the materials necessary for the future construction of the temple. Now, David will never see the completed project, but that doesn't stop him from dedicating himself to doing what he can to make it happen. And because of his efforts, it did happen.

The reality of life is that not all of us are called to build temples. But if we cannot build, we can gather the materials. If we cannot go to serve, we can support someone who goes in our place. If we cannot change the world, we can change one life.

David built a greater temple than he could have ever imagined. He built the line out of which came Jesus Christ. God's "no" to us now may allow us to say "yes" to something later, something bigger and better than we could have ever imagined. It will happen – if there's room in our arms for God's plan.